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## **The Maternal Lineage: Orality and Language in Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Sayings***

Veruska Cantelli<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

As its title, *Family Sayings*, suggests, it is through a body of sayings, stories, poems and songs, recalled by her mother, that the author Natalia Ginzburg tells the story of her family before, during and after WWII. Within the turmoil and chaos of the fascist regime and the war, there is a language, a lexicon, capable of establishing a comforting and familiar zone for the members of the family. Through repetitions of sayings and sketches, Natalia Ginzburg will present a work, partly oral and partly written, blurring the relationship between author/reader and storyteller/listener. In a time when consumerism is rampant in post-war Italy, when the family entity and unity is threatened by the individualistic and capitalistic model of prosperity and success, and when television is slowly annulling people's chances to communicate, Ginzburg establishes the writing of autobiography within immediacy, orality, and relationality, subverting the well-established notion of the genre as the story of an individual and his/her personality. Published in 1968, *Family Sayings* seems to appear in direct opposition with the revolutionary sentiments of the time. For Italian feminists a critique of any institution began with one of patriarchy, for Ginzburg with a reevaluation of the mother not as guardian of a nation, but as an individual with her own economy of authenticity. In a moment when entire student movements are demanding a deconstruction of institutional and family structures, Ginzburg claims maternal lineage as a transformative experience toward a social, political and literary restoration.

*Keywords:* Women's Literature, Autobiography, Storytelling, Performance Studies

We are made of time.  
We are its feet and its voice.  
The Feet of time walk in our shoes.  
Sooner or later, we all know, the wind of time will erase the tracks.  
Passage of nothing, steps of no one? The voices of time tell of the voyage.

"Time Tells" in *Voices of Time. A Life in Stories*  
by Eduardo Galeano

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Natalia Ginzburg's preface to *Family Sayings* is presented to the reader as an instruction on how to read the rest of the book, as well as a justification for the gaps and falls that memory may have left in the process of recording this family history. Ginzburg confirms that there are two parallel processes occurring in writing her family history, one based on reality and one on memory. Neither is completely reliable in rendering a story, as reality appears to be only "faint reflections and sketches," while memory in Ginzburg's words "is treacherous." Therefore, she advises her readers to consider the book as a novel, "without demanding of it either more or less than what a novel can offer."<sup>2</sup> Ginzburg has created in the very first pages of her book a mode of reading, a pact that will enable to submit all preoccupations on factuality or truth. As readers we are asked to access the text as "the record of a family" (a biography?) and a novel, while, as critics, we are faced with the impossibility of locating the text into a genre.

I have set down only what I myself could recall. Consequently, if this book is read as a chronicle of events it may be objected that there are omissions. Although the book is founded on reality, I think it should be read as though it were a novel, that is, read without demanding of it either more or less than what a novel can offer.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense with *Family Sayings*, Ginzburg abandons any assumption about the genre of auto/biography. Reading it as a novel, Ginzburg imagines, will allow the reader to navigate through the text not as a detective but rather as a witness who participates in the unfolding and repetitions of a collective history. Now a classic of autobiographical studies,<sup>4</sup> Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography as "the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular, the story of his personality" is transgressed by Ginzburg's work. *Family Sayings* may fulfill the requirements of Lejeune's standard model of autobiography in its narrative chronological intention and in its desire to historicize, but it escapes its requirements by being an auto/biography propelled towards the "other" where the self is disclosed/undisclosed within the sketches, the voices and the stories of others.

Despite the author's instructions, I propose a reading of *Family Sayings* as an example of an autobiography that in fact subverts the definition of the genre as individualistic. Natalia Ginzburg takes the role of the storyteller who retrieves a language no longer existent in her time and space and residing solely in her memory as a collective history. In her recreation of voices she ends up reproducing the world of storytelling whose main voice and transmitter in her lifetime was represented by the mother. Through the repetition of sayings and sketches, Ginzburg presents a work partly oral, partly written, blurring once again, as in the preface of the book, the relationship between author/reader and storyteller/listener. In a time when consumerism is rampant in postwar Italy, when the family entity and unity are threatened by consumerism and capitalistic models of modernity and maternal relationships are being put to the test by feminist agendas attempting to liberate women from the binding of traditional and patriarchal family relations, Ginzburg talks

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<sup>2</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Sayings*, (New York: Little Brown, 1963) Preface.

<sup>3</sup> *Family Sayings* Preface.

<sup>4</sup> In his article "The Autobiographical Pact" Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as "the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality." Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

about words, sayings and stories as the essence of life, offering not only a testimony of loss but also a reevaluation of maternal lineages in collective autobiography.

## Genesis

*Family Sayings* is, in part, the story of the Levi family before, during and after WWII. The first half of the book is distinguished by descriptions of the family members directly from the subtle voice of young Natalia, the youngest of five, and by the liveliness of a domestic environment of an apartment in the city of Turin made of friends and readings of poetry and Proust. The patriarch, a professor of biology, is immediately depicted as a vociferous authoritarian, and very devoted to the memory of his mother. His scientific investigations never bring him to feel the desire to walk on a different path or have a conversation with people with whom he does not share common friends. Yelling and screaming must have been a great part of the personality of Natalia Ginzburg's father who would burst with insults and reprimands to his children and his wife at the table or during hiking expeditions loathed by everyone and that the mother called "the devil's idea of fun for his children."<sup>5</sup>

The author describes the father during a return from a vacation in the mountains outside of Turin:

After a couple of hours in the mail-coach, we arrived at the station and took our places in the train. Suddenly we realized that our luggage had been left on the platform. The guard raised his flag and shouted 'Away she goes.' 'Oh no she doesn't,' my father roared with a shout that echoed through the whole coach, and the train did not move until the last of our bags was on board."<sup>6</sup> However, it seems that shouting did not occur only as a desperate measure, but as a way for the father to communicate, a way that of course always appeared enraged and despotic. For instance in a scene Ginzburg explains how her father named her mother's young friends with babies 'the babas' and then she says "When supper-time was approaching, he would shout from his study, 'Lydia, Lydia! Have all those "babas" gone? And the last 'baba' could be seen slinking in terror down the passage and slipping out through the front door."<sup>7</sup>

The father's roaring, especially towards his wife, appear to be a reaffirmation of his order and structure: the voice of ruling. Reprimanding expressions marks our first encounter with the father's sayings: "behave yourself!" and "You people don't know how to sit at a table." The mother's sayings are random, short sentences she recalls from people met in her life: "Lovely, lovely. Too long in the neck" is an example from which she heard from a big-chested man standing in front of a hairdressers' window. Ginzburg notes that her mother's ordinary speech was constantly colored by reproductions of phrases she heard from strangers, family, or friends. These phrases then became familiar sayings, known and shared by everyone. Ginzburg's mother appears to live wrapped in the presence of these comforting familiar voices, songs and sayings, as maps and points of references guiding her world. Giuliana Minghelli describes Natalia Ginzburg as the "writer/storyteller" who in telling/writing recovers the primordial knowledge/language made of

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<sup>5</sup> *Family Sayings* 10

<sup>6</sup> *Family Sayings* 16

<sup>7</sup> *Family Sayings* 16

sounds, words and stories heard in childhood. This oral language, that in the text has become Ginzburg's writing, finds its source in the parents' voices, stories and sayings. However, while the father's language comes to represent the language of negation, with his continuous bursts of authority and judgment, the mother's, with her recollections, becomes her primary inspiration.<sup>8</sup>

My mother, on the other hand, enjoyed telling stories—storytelling made her happy. Turning to one or other of us at the table she would begin a story. Whether it was about my father's family or her own, she became radiant with pleasure, and it always seemed as if she were telling that story for the first time to ears that had never heard it.<sup>9</sup>

Minghelli defines *Lessico familiare* not as an autobiography but as a biographical account of the author's family, her analysis portrays Ginzburg's narrative voice as that of the "cantastorie" ("singer of stories"), of the storyteller, initiated in the Italian literary tradition with the *Novellino* and influential in the works of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and later of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*.

The story of the Levi family is one made of stories, it is a story defined by a practice of telling which is far from being observant to any temporal linearity (a plot with a beginning, a middle and an end), it is one that capriciously, and maybe we should also add inevitably, follows its own secret rhythm returning over and over upon itself and therefore eternally retelling itself. These stories, narrated in the best traditional ways of the storytellers, "to kill time," end up capturing it that is representing time. The story of the Levi family is the story of the time and space of its telling, the home and the quotidian. It is also indirectly the story of its storytellers who, as Scheherazade did, through telling, challenge time and death.<sup>10</sup>

Guided by Benjamin, Minghelli affirms that the identification with the role of storyteller places Ginzburg in a space that she identifies as being in between, caught between the role of the transmitter of a collective history unmarked by the sense of ownership and subjectivity, and the one of the autobiographer; the latter though only in her practice of recovering through narrating her passion for storytelling and for 'the world of words'.<sup>11</sup>

The autobiography, if we still want to refer to it as being one, is written through a process of subtraction, and it is created through the definition of that which in drawing is called negative space, the space that captures the figure of the world. The storyteller achieves this representation by shifting the attention from people to stories and words, which are the collective heritage of knowledge unmarked by subjective ownership and that the narrator simply takes upon itself to transmit. If we are wondering whether the subject of the narration would be either the figure or the space that surrounds that narration, at this point the most accurate answer

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<sup>8</sup>Giuliana Minghelli, "Ricordando il quotidiano. Lessico familiare o l'arte del cantastorie." in *Italica* (Volume 72 Number 2, 1995) 33

<sup>9</sup>*Family Sayings* 23

<sup>10</sup>My Translation

<sup>11</sup>Minghelli calls it "il mondo delle parole"

should be neither one nor the other, the answer should rather be the uncertain and changeable surroundings that separates them: the air where the words still echo, suspended and fixed even after the actors of the dialogue and their storyteller have left the scenes.<sup>12</sup>

Minghelli sees in the return to the maternal lineage the realization of the maternal desire of familiarity transmitted by the mother through her stories and thus as an attempt to recreate a memory of quotidian life in a time of war. It is also through her writing and the reappropriation of the maternal language and teachings, Minghelli points out, that Ginzburg experiences and fulfills her return to childhood.

*Lessico familiare* is the acknowledgement of an indebtedness and it represents the attempt to absolve it. However, the absolution may not go beyond its acknowledgement, which is the acknowledgement of a child's desire for the mother: a return to her teachings, the reappropriation of her word.<sup>13</sup>

Is What Minghelli identifies as indebtedness, in fact, a sense of guilt? She refers to it as a moral indebtedness (not a responsibility) that Natalia Ginzburg may or may not fulfill by retrieving and reconstructing her memory and that manifests itself through a child's desire for the mother. Read this way, Ginzburg's autobiography (although Minghelli seems to deny any possibility to call the text as such) will remain confined into a frame that sees it as a nostalgic longing for the warmth of childhood memories and of maternal love; while instead the author's attempt to save, collect, transmit, and report in fact shifts the work into the domain of collective memory and places it right within the genre of autobiography, as the threshold of existing for itself and the other at the same time. The work needs to be reconsidered in opposition to the isolated practice of recovery and reconstruction, but as a practice that brings the self and the other in a simultaneous coexistence within the retelling of the stories, as the following quotation from Ginzburg about the stories as hieroglyphics, wants to suggest:

There are five of us children. We live in different cities now, some of us abroad, and we do not write to one another much. When we meet we can be indifferent and aloof. But one word, one phrase is enough, one of those ancient phrases, heard and repeated an infinite number of times in our childhood. [...] for us to pick up in a moment our old intimacy and our childhood and youth, linked indissolubly with these words and phrases. These phrases are our Latin, the vocabulary of our days gone by, our Egyptian hieroglyphics or Babylonian symbols. They are the evidence of a vital nucleus which has ceased to exist, but which survives in its texts salvaged from the fury of the waters and the corrosion of time.<sup>14</sup>

Teresa Picarazzi brilliantly illustrates the relationality of the "I" in the writings of Natalia Ginzburg through a reading based on the object-relations theory that poses attention to the lineage of identification between mother and daughter. She calls *Family Sayings* an expression of maternal

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<sup>12</sup> My Translation

<sup>13</sup> My Translation

<sup>14</sup> *Family Sayings* 24

desire. Picarazzi explains that the lost relationship between mother and daughter, caused by the universal ideal of man, pervasive in the intellectual and social order, disrupts the pre-oedipal bond between mother and daughter, creating a desire, which in Natalia Ginzburg, is expressed in the form of writing. “That expression of maternal desire is the articulation of voice, the appropriation of an “I,” the act of writing itself (or of telling one’s own life story). Maternal discourse thus unfolds as an attempt to recuperate or reason what has been lost, and also to situate that “I” relationally.”<sup>15</sup> In her study of the theory and practice of women’s autobiographical selves, Susan Stanford Friedman takes issue with French critic Georges Gusdorf’s proclamation of the following equation: autobiography equals individuality<sup>16</sup>. Basing her critical analysis on theorists like Rowbotham and Chodorow Friedman ends her essay by reversing one of Gusdorf’s assertions and states that in women’s autobiography the “autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythm everywhere in the community.”<sup>17</sup> While Friedman uses the object-relations theory to justify women’s relational autobiographies with communities and other groups in a more general term, substituting the mother for other presences in a woman’s life, Picarazzi draws into the theory’s fundamental idea of identification and disidentification between mothers and daughters and proposes it in her collection of critical essays titled, *Maternal Desire Natalia Ginzburg’s Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters* as an interpretation of Natalia Ginzburg’s entire work. Picarazzi’s analysis of Ginzburg’s work is grounded in this belief: “our understanding of the term *women’s autobiographical writings* is one that considers intersubjective and relational gender and voice, and embeddedness in an other.”<sup>18</sup>

Ginzburg’s maternal lineage needs to be placed within the specific context of Italian Feminism of the sixties. Feminist historian, Luisa Passerini, explains that post-war generations viewed mothers as accomplices of a fascist patriarchal family structure, who placed more value on boys than girls, and therefore nourished and perpetuated an alliance between masculinity and freedom. In *Autobiography of a Generation*, a collection of interviews with post 1968 students that is now a landmark study on the connections between the Fascist era and the 1968 student uprising, she concludes:

The theatrical game, the ability to divide oneself in two and observe oneself, is part of the formation of subjects. But what internal images guided the woman in this appearance before the footlights? One strong impulse was negative: to distance themselves from their mothers, to reject their model completely. The new models offered by the most visible movement of women were mediated by an idea of liberation that was partly masculine, partly androgynous.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Teresa Picarazzi, *Maternal Desire Natalia Ginzburg’s Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002) 18

<sup>16</sup> George Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” in Trans. James Olney. Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 31

<sup>17</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings* and edited by Shari Benstock. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 79

<sup>18</sup> *Maternal Desire* 26

<sup>19</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy 1968*. (Tran. Lisa Erdberg. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 24

By positioning the new models directly in relation to a masculine one the newly formed collectives ended up recreating a split present in Italian social structures. They also reiterated a more fundamental conflict already existent, but now more problematic, between mothers and daughters and between women. In her study of women's autobiographies, Graziella Parati clearly states that holding the value that youth belongs to the father or to an almost ephebic androgynous hero:

Supplies a more tender form of discourse for women involved in the political struggle of the time, but it also displaces attention from difference to homogeneous and misleading universal identity that cannot be translated into practice, into the still-dominated hierarchical divisions in the movements of the sixties.<sup>20</sup>

This analysis illustrates the extent to which gender oppression was grounded and well assimilated even within instances of revolt. The lack of positive feminine models ended up transforming into Matrophobia, as well as bringing women against each other. The words of a former female student, interviewed by Passerini, lucidly demonstrates this point: "I wanted to have a positive female figure because I had this tragedy inside, of not being able to find some important female point of reference, that might somehow give me peace."<sup>21</sup> Less than a decade later, the works by Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich will help put these fears into a well-historicized account. The work by Ginzburg needs to be grounded in a context that sees, on one side, the new generation of the sixties, trying to turn the page from the experience of their parents under the fascist regime, looking to sever from the institution of the family and find new models of community life that is different from the traditional ones reinforced by the fascist ideology by Catholic influence, or those created by the economic boom. And on the other side, as we will see, is the consumeristic lifestyle that is stripping local identity. Ginzburg proposes the narrative of a woman whose vocation as a writer is organically webbed within that of a mother/ daughter/ writer/ intellectual. Her work, seemingly anachronistic or anti-feminist, is not a nostalgic return to childhood, but a return to the family as an observer who explores the self from the threshold of stories and sayings, who establishes a lineage between the experience of motherhood, writing, and political responsibility; a work that ultimately resonates with the personal and political discourse of Third World Feminism.

In her section about consciousness, identity and writing in connection to Third World Women's writings, Chandra Talpade Mohanty affirms that the Latin American genre of Testimonios is "unlike traditional autobiography, constitutively public, and collective (for and of the people)" and this is why it represents a subversive mode of knowledge-making not based on an individual woman and her own struggle, but marked by a definition of self as plural and collective. Mohanty evokes the works of Ford-Smith and the discussion on alternative paradigms of subjectivity not based on the individualist liberal feminist theory of consciousness, but on the conceptualization of collective selves and on "consciousness as the political practice of historical memory."<sup>22</sup> By highlighting the writings of Alarcon, Ford-Smith, Anzaldúa, and Sommer as posing "a serious challenge to the liberal humanist notions of subjectivity and agency,"<sup>23</sup> Mohanty

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<sup>20</sup> Graziella Parati, *Public History, Private Stories: Italian Women's Autobiographies*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 136

<sup>21</sup> *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy 1968* 100

<sup>22</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press Books, 2003) 80

<sup>23</sup> *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* 82



shifts the focus from the singular story of an individual and his/her personality to “questions of memory, experience, knowledge, history, consciousness and agency in the creation of narratives of the (collective self).”<sup>24</sup> In the words of the iconic collection, *This Bridge Called My back*, Ginzburg’s politicized identity enters “the lives of others”<sup>25</sup> and her writing/speaking is embedded within the memory, struggles and losses of her family and close friend’s antifascist activities that she rescues through a chronicle of a communal lexicon. Her interpretation of the biblical character of Mary of Bethany (misidentified in Medieval times as Mary Magdalene) in the *Gospel of Matthew*, a film by poet, filmmaker and public intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini, becomes a paradigm of her intellectual participation in a man-centered world of writers who assumes the non-masculine and hierarchical position of *speaking to*, but of someone who listens and *speaks with* others. Despite criticism and oppositions, Mary of Bethany sits by Jesus’ feet and claims her space as an apostle, assuring herself a position among men as “a disciple who listens to the Lord and speaks with him in the company of others.”<sup>26</sup>

### Historical Frameworks

After the death of her husband, Leone, who was tortured by Fascists for his subversive political activities, Ginzburg continued to work in the publishing house that he found, along with Giulio Einaudi. At the same time, Ginzburg is active in pursuing her work as a writer. Her essays “My Vocation” in the collection titled *The Little Virtues* provide a profound reflection on the subject of writing and motherhood.

“[...] then my children were born and when they were very little I could not understand how anyone could sit herself down to write if she had children [...] I began to feel contempt for my vocation. Now and again I longed for it desperately and felt that I was in exile, but I tried to despise it and make fun of it and occupy myself solely with the children. [...] Because the feeling I then had for my children was one that I had not yet learnt to control. But then little by little I learned, and it did not even take that long. I still made tomato sauce and semolina, but simultaneously I thought about what I could be writing.”<sup>27</sup>

As her experience as a mother develops, so does her ability to reestablish her sense of self as separate from the life and necessities of her children that is ultimately manifested in Ginzburg, as the capacity to remember, seeing and imagining.

I started writing again like someone who has never written, because it was a long time since I had written anything, and the words seemed rinsed and fresh, everything was new and as it were untouched, and full of taste and fragrance. I wrote in the afternoons while a local girl took my children out for a walk [...] I put a few invented people into my story and a few real people from the countryside where we were living; and some of the words that came to me as I

<sup>24</sup> *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* 82

<sup>25</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called my Back* (Persephone Press, 1981) 22

<sup>26</sup> Mary Ann Beavis “Reconsidering Mary of Bethany” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (47 74 (2): 281-297 April 2012) 295

<sup>27</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, “My Vocation” in *Little Virtues* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1985) 63

was writing were idioms and imprecations local to that area and which I had not known before and these new expressions were like a yeast that fermented and gave life to all the old words.<sup>28</sup>

Italian Poet and critic Luigi Fontanella interpreted Ginzburg's archival recalling as a form of nostalgia.<sup>29</sup> While it may be appropriate to imagine the author's desire for recreating the familiar environment that was linked to happy as well as tragic times, constantly accompanied by the orchestra of her parents' sayings and her mother's stories, as nostalgic, this would also overlook the author's role as rescuer of a family's history told by her mother, informed and motivated by what I call her sense of responsibility. "It was my mother who used to tell these stories of Grandmother Dolcetta's egg and of 'our Rosina,' because my father told them badly and made a mess of them by breaking in with thunderous snorts of laughter."<sup>30</sup> In rewriting these stories, Ginzburg, as a daughter-storyteller, takes the responsibility to pass on the family history at the same time as writing herself and her identity.

The narratives (the narrator) assumes the same cathartic function as a psychoanalytic 'talking cure' in that they are retrospectively recreating and ordering their family stories, as the narrators construct their own writing selves. Through their choice of friendship, lifestyle, career as writer, or intellectual, and dress, these daughters are separating from the family while at the same time writing it.<sup>31</sup>

While the boastful voice of the father follows in the background, Ginzburg takes her role as a daughter/storyteller and through the voice of the mother she breaks the silence. Unlike her mother, though, who in the author's words, "did not like talking about death", Ginzburg fulfills the gap of the unspoken loneliness and tragedy of loss. To the family sayings and stories she adds her own about the death of her husband Leone Ginzburg, the suicide of Cesare Pavese, who was a friend, a poet co-founder of the publishing house Einaudi with Leone Ginzburg, and a fervent antifascist, the terror of escaping the Nazis with her children in the hills of the mountainous Italian region of Abruzzo, and the anguish of loneliness. Her desires and fantasies become other stories to add to those already existing in her memory. In her soft-spoken voice, Ginzburg marks her identity as a daughter/sister/mother, as well as a writer and intellectual. Certainly, for Ginzburg, "resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering and of writing."<sup>32</sup> By shifting "I" to "We", she proclaims a plural self in its vitality and correspondence with others.

Natalia Ginzburg spent her entire writing vocation, followed later in her life by a participation in the Italian Parliament. Immediately after the war in Italy the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) sided by the Church, and the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) began contending the participation of women in their advertisements. While the DC advocated its influence through solidarity, associationism and traditional moral and religious values, the PCI pressed women to be part of the workforce at the same time as maintaining a very tight affiliation to the traditional

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<sup>28</sup> "My Vocation" 63

<sup>29</sup> Luigi Fontanella, "A reading of *Le voci della sera* and *Lessico Familiare*" in *Natalia Ginzburg A Voice of the Twentieth Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 37

<sup>30</sup> *Family Sayings* 23

<sup>31</sup> *Maternal Desire* 96

<sup>32</sup> *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* 80

family values. However, the effects of American consumerism fully embraced and validated by the DC started to take a toll on these values.

At an ideological level, traditional Catholic social theory lay uneasily along side liberal individualism. The Vatican had consistently warned against the effects of industrial society, and the Christian Democrats, especially those who had been part of Dosetti's faction, preached the need to safeguard Catholic values in a changing society. Solidarity (*Solidarismo*), charity and associationism, the state's duty to protect the family, the weak and the poor, were constant themes in their propaganda. However while the DC paid lip-service to these values and ideas, in practice the majority of the party fully espoused the cause of 'modernization.' Here the key themes, strongly shaped by American influences, were the liberty of the individual and the firm, the unfettered development of technology and consumer capitalism, the free play of market forces.<sup>33</sup>

In his study of the signs of Americanization in post-war Italy, Paolo Scrivano writes, "Nowhere was this more evident than in the domestic sphere, which served as a central target of the broader cultural campaign to start afresh after 1945."<sup>34</sup> As other European countries after the war, Italy became one of the contended territories of the Cold War agenda. US-funded programs had the double function of revitalizing Italian public administration, infrastructure and reconstruction, as well as to "influence Italian society and everyday life".<sup>35</sup> From the emphasis of collectivity and cooperatives of the Fascist regime, the newly rebuilt homes, heavily supported by the US, shifted the focus toward the individual and the private sphere. Ideals of modular homes equipped with commodities were exhibited in Milan and other Northern cities. Scrivano brings the example of *Domus*, an Italian magazine about homes, with its impressive aim and success at disseminating American models of modernity and achievement of social status. The magazine was particularly focused on an emphasis on radio and television as American solutions to style.<sup>36</sup> Another striking example Scrivano reports in his study, is the result of a survey conducted by the research office USIS in Rome, with the peculiar purpose of gathering "What Italians want[ed] to know about American Life" that once again reiterated the influence of American life when its results pointing toward "Living Conditions" and "Family Life" at the top. In post-war Italy, a family comprised by a patriarch, a daughter or son, and a wife starts to become the normative ideal of family life in which owning goods and commodities translates into modernity and development and in which gender divisions are well established. "In this way, the 1960s critique of consumerism and the debit side of domestic modernization in large measure grew out of the 1950s effort to make over Italian home life as a symbol of post-fascist progress and prosperity."<sup>37</sup> By framing modernization with American consumerism, the "myth of the masses inherited from the fascist regime" was being replaced by the "American myth of the individual"—the road towards resisting communist ideals was being paved.<sup>38</sup> The consumeristic ideology of postwar brought an ideal that

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<sup>33</sup> Rebecca West, "What as Ideal and Who as Real: Portraits of Wives and Mothers in Italian Postwar Domestic Manuals, Fiction, and Film" in *Women in Italy, 1945-1960: an Interdisciplinary Study* 26

<sup>34</sup> Paolo Scrivano, "Signs of Americanization in Italian Domestic Life: Italy's Postwar Conversion to Consumerism" *Journal of Contemporary History* (Vol40 (2), 317-340) 321

<sup>35</sup> "Signs of Americanization in Italian Domestic Life: Italy's Postwar Conversion to Consumerism" 321

<sup>36</sup> "Signs of Americanization in Italian Domestic Life: Italy's Postwar Conversion to Consumerism" 336

<sup>37</sup> "Signs of Americanization in Italian Domestic Life: Italy's Postwar Conversion to Consumerism" 337

<sup>38</sup> "Signs of Americanization in Italian Domestic Life: Italy's Postwar Conversion to Consumerism" 338

altered all aspects of cultural and social life, including the representations of motherhood and womanhood. It sustained and composed a model of womanhood in the sphere of domesticity that pushed women to purchase new appliances, compiling a set of essentialist characteristics tied to the way of finding domestic happiness through how-to manuals—building up instructions and tips to domestic, social and family life—and in the end reduced women “to the essential whatness of motherhood.”<sup>39</sup>

In her essay, “What as Ideal and Who as Real: Portraits of Wives and Mothers in Italian Postwar Domestic Manuals, Fiction, and Film,” Rebecca West analyzes the *Enciclopedia della donna*, a 987-page compile of essays and entries on the subject of being a woman, published in 1950. In the section, “The Woman in the House, in the Family, and in Social Life,” West underlines that the article distinguished itself from other manuals for its modern perspective of women. The first part of the essay, dedicated to the home, announces that women are no longer “angels of the hearth,” but rather they are “on the same level of equality and regarding duties and rights” as men. However, this achievement is not considered as a fully positive one, but rather as an adjustment to the changes of modern society determined by a “crisis of the masculine world.” Despite the author’s claims of having progressive views, it still presents a traditional belief when it comes to motherhood “even on the level of intellectual and work-related equality, women will never be fully themselves if they do not have the experience of maternity.”<sup>40</sup>

The essentialist view of womanhood was one that penetrated into all aspects of Italian society and, even in Natalia Ginzburg’s family, it certainly dominated the views of her parents. “Gino worked hard at school and so did Mario. Paola did not work at all but that did not worry my father. She was a girl, and my father thought that it did not matter if girls did not try at school, as they would get married afterwards.”<sup>41</sup> Motherhood is a subject often tackled by the author in her novels and short stories. But, in *Family Sayings*, her experience as a mother goes hand in hand with that of being a writer. Ginzburg rebuilds the space of home for women, not as a domestic trap, but as a sight for collective consciousness, where agency is “figured in the small, day to day practices and struggles”<sup>42</sup> and where a woman can reinvent herself. A meditation on the hardship in balancing her roles is found in the short story “Worn out Shoes” in which she expresses an avid desire for that which is degraded, inadequate and consumed—as opposed to the newness of a bourgeois lifestyle. Scholar Sharon Wood describes Ginzburg as:

a writer whose beguiling simplicity of style and narrative technique mask a complex view of the world [...] she nonetheless takes issue with radical feminism, as did so many other writers of her generation. She shares the neorealist compulsion to direct representation, but rejects a preoccupation with class struggle, heroic resistance, and heroic poor [...] Ginzburg presents history in the lower case; her characters are not heroic protagonists but drift on the eddies created by events played out elsewhere. [...] Ginzburg, like Elsa Morante or Günter Grass, takes a worm’s eye view of history, her characters caught up in events which they can barely comprehend, while the antifascism of some

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<sup>39</sup> “What as Ideal and Who as Real: Portraits of Wives and Mothers in Italian Postwar Domestic Manuals, Fiction, and Film” 26

<sup>40</sup> “What as Ideal and Who as Real: Portraits of Wives and Mothers in Italian Postwar Domestic Manuals, Fiction, and Film” 28

<sup>41</sup> *Family Sayings* 57

<sup>42</sup> *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* 83

characters in the novel is seen to be rooted in the complex and muddy personal experience as much as in political ideology.<sup>43</sup>

It is in her re-appropriation of “stories,” that the author declares both her neorealist vision and her appeal to writing as a commitment to reality, the reality of those narratives forgotten by history that yet make history. As a young aspiring writer in a post-Fascist environment that declared “writing to be incompatible with a woman’s true vocation as a mother.”<sup>44</sup> (8) She looks for this denied experience, in the essence of poems and describes them as “simple, made of nothing, made of the things one could see”.<sup>45</sup> In her essay “Experience”, Joan W. Scott draws an excursus on the value, the function and the meaning of experience in the making of history, in which she affirms that,

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. [...] The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world [...] The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the working of this system and its historicity.<sup>46</sup>

The shift from knowledge, to the process of turning experience into ‘material’ for historicity is essential in order to understand history as an operation that employs the subject, language and experience. “Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject’s history. Language is the site of history’s enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two.”<sup>47</sup>

It is through language, and its contextualized subjective origin, that experience becomes history. *Family Sayings* is the possibility of writing about oneself through the determination of ‘others.’ Using Joan Scott’s definition, it is the enactment of writing one’s own story in a familiar shared language that makes this autobiography a collective experience of the self, while becoming an interposition between personal/particular and historical/universal for the reader.

Ginzburg’s representation of family dynamics in her autobiography, as well as in her novels, highlights the importance of the exploration of family relationality as an exploration of one’s identity and a manifestation of what Mohanty refers to as the “plurality of the self.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sharon Wood “Women’s Writing in the Postwar Period”150

<sup>44</sup> Laura Benedetti, *Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006) 8

<sup>45</sup> My Translation. *Family Sayings* 46

<sup>46</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Experience” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, (New York: Routledge, 1992) 25

<sup>47</sup> “Experience” 34

<sup>48</sup> Alarcon, Norma, “The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism.” In *Chicana Criticism in a Social Context*, edited by H. Calderon and J. D. Saldivar. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989) 3

## Between Neorealism and Fantasized Rebellion

Ginzburg's narrative fluctuates between her poetic proximity to Neorealism and a longing fantasy about being lost beyond a historical intellectual duty—central to Neorealism itself. Her attraction to non-bourgeois contexts had been part of her adolescent years when she would seek out “the dreariest places in the city, [...] the most desolate public gardens, the most squalid milk-bars, the grubbiest cinemas and the barest and emptiest cafés,”<sup>49</sup> to meet with three friends who lived in poverty and with whom she could escape the well-ordered bourgeois life she lived with her parents. She admired the way two of her close friends “had constructed their own code of living in which paternal authority had no value and which consisted of only occasional querulous remonstrance.”<sup>50</sup> All together, sitting on a cold bench, they would imagine being untied ships drifting on the sea. Her wish to live and imagine a destitute life, untied from authority, can be viewed as a critique of the sanitized life of a bourgeois environment and as the urgency to be in a reality made of unheroic individuals:

Tribes in centrifugal movement that find brief moments of respite, then move on again, and end up decimate. Their various components – widowers, estranged spouses, surrogate mothers, old aunts, lovers, lover's relatives, neighbors, children of various age, and step-relatives – are very precariously and unconventionally linked. They cling ferociously to each other, but they are invariably poised to escape into solitude and distance, obsessed by their own unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, problems.<sup>51</sup>

In the 1964 publication of his original 1946 neorealist novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Italo Calvino, a friend of Ginzburg and a colleague at the Einaudi Publishing House, writes the Preface in an almost explanatory tone. He appears eager to place his work within the Neorealist poetics context and to explain the political and literary motives behind an autobiographical work so distinct from the rest of his later work. Calvino says:

The literary explosion of those years in Italy was not so much an artistic phenomenon, more a physical, existential, collective need. [...] The fact of having emerged from an experience – a war, a civil war – which had spared no one, established an immediacy of communication between the writer and his public: we were face to face, on equal terms, bursting with stories to tell [...] the greyness of everyday life seemed something that belonged to another epoch; we existed in a multi-coloured world of stories. The result was that those who began writing in that period found themselves dealing with the same subject matter as the anonymous storytellers: not only did we have the adventures that each one of us had endured personally or witnessed, but there were also tales which came to us already formed as narratives, with a voice, a cadence, a facial gesture to accompany them.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Family Sayings* 113

<sup>50</sup> *Family Sayings* 114

<sup>51</sup> *Family Sayings* 77-78

<sup>52</sup> Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* (Harper Perennial, 2000) 8

Calvino attributes parts of his novel to this newly born oral tradition. The experiences of the war became the “raw material” for post-war writers who felt pressed by the urge to express themselves.

Characters, landscapes, shoot-outs, political messages, dialect words, swear words, lyric passages, violence and sexual encounters, all these were but colours on our palette, notes on our scale [...] we claimed to be a school of objective writers, but there were never such effusive lyricists as us.<sup>53</sup>

One of the major objectives of neorealist writers was to retrieve Italian dialects considered the language of the immediacy and of everyday life. For these intellectuals, dialects represented an essential characteristic of post-Fascist Italian identity. “The style was very uneven, at times bordering on the precious, at other times just written down as it came, aiming solely at immediacy of expression; it became a kind of documentary archive (including local sayings and songs), which bordered folklore...”<sup>54</sup> But the most crucial part of the Preface is Calvino’s analysis on the historical and political context that shaped the consciousness of the postwar neorealist writers.

But I was not so culturally ill-informed as to be unaware that the influence of history on literature is indirect, slow and often contradictory [...] We all knew that, we were not that naïve, but I believe that when one has lived through a significant historical epoch or taken an active part in momentous events, one feels a particular responsibility....<sup>55</sup>

In his novel, Calvino had wanted to represent the anti-hero,

The marginal people, the lumpenproletariat! [...] What do we care about someone who is already a hero, someone who already has class-consciousness? What we ought to be portraying is the process by which those two goals are reached! As long as there exists a single person who does not have that awareness, our duty must be to concern ourselves solely with that person!<sup>56</sup>

This was the spirit with which he wrote the novel and these were the political and intellectual pillars he shared with Pavese, Ginzburg, Vittorini and Fenoglio. Although Calvino’s novel is purely about the Resistance, the neorealist poetic intersections between the early Calvino of *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* and Ginzburg’s *Family Saying* are multiple: the focus on reporting stories, the immediacy of language, and the choice of an observant “child’s eye” as the prospective through which to make sense of the surroundings – the latter a key element masterfully developed by De Sica in his 1948 film, *Ladri di Biciclette*. Ginzburg had retained in her work that early commitment to reality and, as Calvino, twenty years later she returns to those early years, to the language and work produced immediately after the war. *Family Sayings* is for Ginzburg a new study of the roots and truth of language.

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<sup>53</sup> *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* 13

<sup>54</sup> *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* 13

<sup>55</sup> *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* 17

<sup>56</sup> *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* 17

At that time two styles of writing were fashionable: one was a simple enumeration of facts, in the wake of a grey damp reality in a bare lifeless landscape; the other was a violent delicious mingling of facts and tears, deep sighs and sobbing. In neither one or the other, was there any selection of words, because in the first the words were absorbed into the greyness, and in the other they were lost amid the groans and sobs. The mistake common to both was a belief that everything could be transmuted into poetry and language, which meant that ultimately there was a revulsion from poetry and language, so strong that it carried with it true poetry and a true sense of language. Everyone was reduced to silence, paralysed by ennui and nausea. We had to go back to choosing words, examining them in order to see whether they were true or false, to see if they had true roots or only the transitory roots of the common illusion. Writers were obliged to take their work seriously. The time that followed was like a hangover, a time of nausea, lassitude and boredom, and everyone felt in one way or another that they had been cheated or betrayed. This was equally true of those who lived in the real world, and those who possessed or thought they possessed means of describing it. And so everyone went their own way again, alone and discontented.<sup>57</sup>

While the storm of the war was happening outside the Levi's home – and inside with the family's participation in antifascist movements – and the appearances of well-known intellectuals, politicians, artists and activists in the house is a quotidian affair, Natalia Ginzburg's interest remains focused on human relations and in people's sense of solitude, which she describes as a prison no one escapes and that is augmented by the pressure of Fascism. When the war ends and many friends disappear, Ginzburg observes that her mother suddenly began to feel disoriented and lost.

Her geography was all confused after the war. She could no longer think calmly of Grassi or Polikar. They had had the power to transform distant countries into something homely, ordinary and cheerful, to make the whole world a town or street which she could go down in a moment in her thoughts, in the steps of those few familiar reassuring names. After the war, the world seemed vast, unknowable and boundless.<sup>58</sup>

This experience marks a reversal in the relationship between mother and daughter. Ginzburg understands she can no longer expect the protection of her mother but rather needs to be protective of her fragile state. Her return to this time is moved by the desire not to experience the warmth of the now lost quotidian family life, but her willingness to reorder and rediscover her memories as an adult who now understands relations through the eyes of compassion:

And now we are really adults we think, and we are astonished that this is what being an adult is—not in truth everything we believed as a child, not in truth self-confidence, not in truth the calm ownership of everything on earth. We are adult because we have behind us the silent presence of the dead, whom we ask to judge our current actions and from whom we ask forgiveness for past offenses: we

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<sup>57</sup>*Family Sayings* 142

<sup>58</sup>*Family Sayings* 140



should like to uproot from our past so many cruel words, so many cruel acts that we committed when, though we feared death, we did not know—we had not yet understood—how irreparable, how irremediable, death is: we are adult because of the silent answers, because of all the silent forgiveness of the dead which we carry within us.<sup>59</sup>

And it is with compassion that she looks at her mother's relationship, made of undisclosed sentiments, her mother who would substitute a saying for a word of acknowledgment, a saying as an evocation:

I rejoined my mother in Florence. Misfortune always made her feel cold and she wrapped herself in a shawl. We did not exchange many words about Leone's death. She had been very fond of him, but she did not like talking about the dead; her constant preoccupation was bathing the children, combing their hair and keeping them warm. 'Do you remember the spindleshanks? and Villi?' she asked. 'What do you think has happened to them?' She had never treated me as an equal but had always been maternal and protective<sup>60</sup>

With a forgiving mind Ginzburg reevaluates her past and the people "who lived through those times with *her* [me]"<sup>61</sup> and states:

All our life we have only known how to be masters and servants: but in that secret moment of ours, in our moment of perfect equilibrium, we have realized that there is no real authority or servitude on the earth. And so it is that now as we turn to that secret moment we look at others to see whether they have lived through an identical moment, or whether they are still far away from it; it is this that we have to know. It is the highest moment in the life of a human being, and it is necessary that we stand with others whose eyes are fixed on the highest moment of their destiny.<sup>62</sup>

This "perfect equilibrium," as "the highest moment in the life of a human being," is realized in the pages of an autobiography in which the self stands not as an authority but as a presence among others and is created within the complex web of relational existence.

Human relationships have to be rediscovered and reinvented every day. We have to remember constantly that every kind of meeting with our neighbor is a human action and so it is always evil and good, true and deceitful, a kindness or a sin. [...] and though we know all the long road we have to travel down in order to arrive at the point where we have a little compassion.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Human Relationships" in *The Little Virtues* 93-94

<sup>60</sup> *Family Sayings* 116

<sup>61</sup> *Family Sayings* Preface

<sup>62</sup> "Human Relationships" 94

<sup>63</sup> "Human Relationships" 95

## Conclusion

Coherence of politics and of action comes from a sociality that itself perhaps needs to be rethought. The very practice of remembering against the grain of “public” or hegemonic history, of locating the silences and the struggles to assert knowledge that is outside the parameters of the dominant, suggests a rethinking of sociality itself.<sup>64</sup>

*Family Saying* is neither an autobiography nor a novel or a biography. It is perhaps all of these genres together under the common characteristic of being a “family historical novel”. The lives narrated, speak for themselves in a collective realm that expands from the particular to the collective, from the personal to the historical, never to be fixed on one event but rather to absorb the complexity of history. Its language is that of memory, imprinted in family sayings that escape the presence and their immediacy to become voices of an eternal, ordered past. It is the story of a family that lives and witnesses the brutalities of one of the most tragic historical times, but is also the story of its author becoming a writer by claiming a maternal lineage. There is no beginning, no middle and no end to this structure of memory, but only the form in which it appears, at times linear, at times contorted into an a-temporality, either mistakenly present or nostalgically passed. It is a memory contained into a realm space/time that begins and ends in the pages of the book but that breathes and expands into history. This recollection springs out in one long shot never cut or edited to take a definite or finished shape. It lives in that ambiguous space of storytelling “where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged, for over the years the tale tellers convert fact into images which are funny, vulgar, amazing or magically real.”<sup>65</sup> And finally, it is a work “a bassorilievo” on which figure after figure is bound by an intricate course where singular forms are accentuated by their relation to others and the absence of heroes.

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<sup>64</sup> *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* 83

<sup>65</sup> Mohanty quoting Sistren, with Honor Ford-Smith, *Lionhart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*. (Toronto: Sister Vision Press 1987) 79

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